



Harnad, Stevan (2016) [Cross-species mind-reading](#). *Animal Sentience* 1(4)

DOI: 10.51291/2377-7478.1120



This article has appeared in the journal *Animal Sentience*, a peer-reviewed journal on animal cognition and feeling. It has been made open access, free for all, by WellBeing International and deposited in the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact wbsr-info@wellbeingintl.org.



Cross-species mind-reading

Response to Racine on [Harnad](#) on *Other Minds*

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Abstract: We can never be sure anyone else is sentient. But we can be sure enough in the case of other people, nonhuman primates, mammals, birds, fish, lower vertebrates and invertebrates as to make scepticism academic and otiose (not to mention monumentally cruel). The only genuinely uncertain kinds of cases are jellyfish, microbes and plants. The rest is not about *whether* but *what* they are feeling.

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The only substantive points on which I might disagree with [Tim Racine](#) (2016) are all in his second paragraph:

1. Racine criticizes the “Cartesian split between mind and behavior.” But having a mind just means having mental states. Mental states just means *felt* states. And feeling is not the same thing as doing (behavior). So there is indeed a split between feeling and doing.
2. Racine suggests that “there is no certainty per se in the first person case.” I think there certainly is. I can be certain that I am feeling whatever I am feeling when I am feeling it. It is only others who cannot be certain I am feeling anything (and I, that others are feeling anything). So I do indeed assume that “we can only be sure about our own minds but have to rely on inference for the minds of others”: inference from what they (and their brains) do as well as from what they say (if they can talk). So we can’t be sure others are feeling. But we can be sure enough in the case of other people, other primates, other mammals, birds, fish, lower vertebrates and invertebrates as to make scepticism academic and otiose (not to mention monumentally cruel). The only genuinely uncertain kinds of cases are jellyfish, microbes and plants. The rest is not about *whether* but *what* they are feeling.
3. I don’t know what “mental concepts” are, so I don’t know what it would mean that although they “essentially involve feelings, many do not.” If the “many” refers to mental states (rather than to “mental concepts,” whatever that might mean) then all

mental states are felt states, hence “essentially involve feelings.” If what is meant by “mental concepts” is states like thinking something, believing something, knowing something, understanding something, meaning something, etc. then, yes, those are felt states too, whilst I’m actually thinking, believing, knowing, understanding, or meaning something. It feels like something to think, believe, know, understand or mean that today is Tuesday. I never had much of a feel for philosophers’ “non-occurrent beliefs” such as my (now occurrent, but a moment ago non-occurrent) belief that today is Tuesday. It feels like something to be believing that today is Tuesday when I’m actually believing it. At other times I would call that information that is encoded in my brain; information I am likely to consult, if asked. That would make it previously an “offline” cerebral state but not a felt one, hence not a mental one, until it came “online” and I felt it. But because both happen in the brain, confusion is invited...

Or perhaps by “mental concepts” Racine means our concepts about the nature of mental states. Well, it certainly feels like something to be having concepts (beliefs, etc.) about the nature of mental states, although many of those concepts today are still murky. On concepts about whether and what mental states others might be in, see (2) above.

4. Racine writes: “whereas we have a pretty good sense of what people mean when they claim they know what an object feels like, it is less clear what a felt mental state consists of (other than typically being accompanied by a verbal report or characteristic pattern of behavior as in other mental states).” Well we know a bit more than that. If someone says or acts as if they feel an itch, we have a pretty good sense of what they mean (if they are telling the truth). And it does not mean “a verbal report or characteristic pattern of behavior.” It means what it feels like to feel an itch. Ditto for believing that today is Tuesday.

The rest of Racine’s commentary seems to agree that we can indeed often correctly infer whether another organism is sentient, and even what it is feeling and thinking, though not with certainty. Our own language, thinking and reasoning of course play a role in this mind-reading capacity, as do our observational skills, felt experiences and perhaps even our “mirror neurons” (whatever – if anything – they may be doing to generate our telepathic skills) (Gallese 2013).

References

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